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THE RELIGIOUS APPROACH TO THE LATIN-AMERICAN MIND

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Social and intellectual transformations taking place in Latin America at the present time call for corresponding adaptations in missionary methods. The intelligent Mexican or South American is not interested in precise doctrinal statements which mean so much to some, nor does he feel inclined to identify himself with any ecclesiastical organization which would tend to alienate him from his race. He is keenly alive to all that has to do with the welfare of his own country; he is proud of his culture, and believes that the Latin race has a distinct contribution to make to the world. But he is not blinded to racial or national shortcomings, and is willing to co-operate heartily with anyone who has the good of his people at heart and who is ready to labor for human betterment in the spirit of Christ and as a friend of man.

The impression which the religious situation of South America made upon the author during his recent tour of the Continent may be summarized as follows: Religion is considered by a large number of the intellectuals of South America to be organized evil, and when one asks them to accept it he is understood to be asking them to work against progress. The Roman Catholic church is thoroughly aroused to this opposition to its organization and is making far-reaching efforts to overcome it and to checkmate the growing reform movements among laboring men, students, and women. The fight between the church and these ever-multiplying movements for social betterment is a most strenuous contest around which other battles will continue to wage for a period of years. The importance of pure morals has heretofore been little recognized in South America and the connection between morality and religion has seldom been made; there is now, however, a growing interest in ethical questions, which gives hope and invites help. The Evangelical churches and the foreign missionaries, while still occupying a very limited circle in the life of the Continent, have now come to the point where their

influence is publicly felt and acknowledged to be rapidly increasing. By probing under the surface there is found a movement toward spiritual life, yet it is almost entirely extra-ecclesiastical, confined to a chosen few of the intellectual class.

Facing such a situation, the North American neighbor, who believes in the reality and power of the Christian religion and desires with all sincerity to help his southern friends, will inquire how it can be done.

The first and most obvious answer is—enlarge the present mission work. There can be no doubt that this work has had far reaching results. To it may be traced many of the social movements which are now stirring the land. Little chapels in dark and dangerous streets; quiet meetings in private homes of individual “believers”; small schools, very lacking, from the standpoint of modern pedagogy, in equipment and teaching force; persistent colporteurs tramping over mountain and plain to distribute the word of God—these as well as the more pretentious evangelistic and educational activities which command wide attention from the public are worthy of duplicating a thousand fold. To the pioneers who have struggled along without equipment, in the midst of fanatical opposition, often with little support from home or field, is due full recognition. No one who has studied the results of their work could fail to have the deepest appreciation for it.

Yet everywhere one finds a holy discontent among the missionaries, and a belief that new methods are necessary. Some are even ready to declare that the need is for a new conception of the missionary task. How this should affect any particular situation must be determined by the individual missionary in view of his environment and of his aptitudes. One thing however seems sure and that is that the basis must be personality. Organization, to the Saxon, seems indispensable. “Wherever two or three Americans are found together, there will they meet and organize.” But two or three Latins, or many times that number, may be together

for many moons, without even thinking of organization. The strongest characteristic of the Hispanic American is individualism. This he has inherited from his American and his Iberian-Arabic ancestry. His relationships are personal. The strength of any leader, political or otherwise, in Hispanic America, lies in his personal relations. Candidates for office do not win by strong platforms but by strong friendships. Business is not captured by a fine organization, which is able to undersell and to hurry up deliveries, but by personal relationships with the buyer. Letters of introduction, which have gone out of style with the Anglo-Saxon are still of much value among Latins. An illustration of the importance of recognition of this emphasis on individualism is seen in the case of a leading intellectual figure who is becoming interested in Protestantism, because he considers that Protestant nations have been more progressive than Catholic, while his ideals of pan-Americanism involve logically for him a sympathetic attitude toward the religion of the Anglo-Saxon Republic of the North. His chief difficulty in Protestantism is a sentimental one, derived from a dislike of its historical founder, Martin Luther. For this scholar Luther is *antipático*. He says that if a man of the type of Francis of Assisi or Abraham Lincoln, instead of the pugnacious Wittenburg monk, had been the founder of Protestantism he would have very much less difficulty in embracing it. Needless to say he should be given new light on the great reformer's character as well as to have pointed out to him that there is more than one type of saintliness needed in the world. The case, however, is interesting as affording an insight into South American psychology. Here it is personality rather than principle that is primarily attractive and for that reason the success of Christianity in this Continent is intimately bound up with the intrinsic attractiveness of the personalities through whom it is mediated. I am more and more convinced that what will ultimately win this Continent will not be naked principle or elaborate organization but living,

breathing, beaming personalities who will bring people into immediate contact with the living and radiant Lord. Instead of wasting a great deal of initial time in controversial disquisitions about the claims of Protestantism, the divine, human figure of Jesus Christ should be presented in all its effulgence; the message should be above all things Cristo-centric—Christ as the satisfier of the heart's longings; Christ as the savior of the individual and society; Christ as the fulness and goal of manhood. Here where bold *Caudillos* have never lacked a following, and men have clung to them through evil and good report, without considering too closely the cause they represented, the words of the Master have a very special significance: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me."

In spite of the well-recognized individualism of the Latin American, however, the Anglo-Saxon missionary in southern countries generally follows his characteristic bent. His first step on taking up his residence in a Latin-American community is very likely to be the setting up of a foreign organization. He thereby makes it just as difficult as possible for anyone with the least standing in the community to approve and accept what the missionary has to offer. Just because the missionary is a foreigner he is on trial in the community. But the organization he sets up makes the matter worse. Organizations are often regarded as only means of forcing methods and ideas upon the unwary and unwilling. But again organization makes unusual demands. The missionary sings hymns and wants his friends to sing. Anyone who knows the educated man of Latin America, with his dignity and reserve, will see how utterly foreign it seems to him to join in singing with a congregation. There are other aspects of this organization quite foreign to Latin-American taste, yet, as he sees the situation, the only way provided for hearing the new truth is to join the organization. If the organization is sheltered in a poorly furnished hall on a side street, as is often the case, and

if the service is conducted in the broken language of a foreigner, or the uncultured tongue of an uneducated national, the difficulties increase. Is it any wonder that often people who are attracted to the evangelical church are the kind who have nothing to lose in social prestige and no cultural prejudices to overcome? The humble classes need the gospel ministry. One of the greatest contributions made by evangelical Christianity toward the development of Latin-American nations is the raising of the *peones* and *rotos* from serfdom into a thinking, efficient middle class. But evangelical Christianity has a message also for the higher classes who now and for a long time to come will furnish the leadership of these nations. It is everywhere recognized that the method for effectively bringing the gospel to the higher classes of Latin America has not been found. When it is found it will pretty surely center around personality.

This does not mean that to win Latin Americans as loyal disciples of the Lord Jesus, organization must be ignored. Latins need the invigorating influences of organization. The best-organized missions are the ones that are getting the best results. The magnificent work of the Methodist Centenary and the Presbyterian New Era movements in Chile and the Southern Baptist mission of Northern Brazil show this clearly. It rather means more emphasis upon methods which are distinctively personal, which in the passing of time, have greater transforming power, through cultivating friendships, eradicating wrong conceptions of life, and planting the leaven of love. There are thousands of forward looking men in South America who are anxious for fellowship with people who know the outside world as well as the South American world. Time spent with such men would redound to the great good of the people whom the missionary has gone to serve. Many would never become members of the missionaries' organization, but some would, and all would contribute to the missionaries' life-purpose.

Several experiments have been tried by which it was hoped that missionary work should be carried along with the natural currents of custom and not set up unnecessarily difficult barriers. These are giving most interesting results. The Scotch mission in Lima founded in 1917, instead of starting as usual with a small preaching service, began with a day school which has been built up to the standard of a secondary school which fits young men for the National University. The whole attention of the mission has been so far given to the building up of that school. But no one can go into the home where these boys are boarded and into the classes where they are taught, without realizing what a far reaching evangelistic work is being carried on among them. Who will say that after a term of years the intensive spiritual cultivation given to those young men will not bear as much or even more fruit than the preaching services held by some other mission in a rented hall at certain hours for those who are willing to listen? Is it merely our Anglo-Saxon tradition or is it a careful study of the methods of Christ and Paul, that brands one course as right and the other as "hedging"? The Scotch mission proposes to open a place for the public proclamation of the gospel as soon as the proper foundations are laid. But I, for one, hope that they will so connect such a chapel with their educational work by announcing public lectures, or something of the kind, that it may be easy and natural for educated men and women to attend and hear the message. Since the director of the school has already been recognized in spite of his well-known religious relationships as an eminent educationalist, and has been elected a professor in the National University, such a step could be readily taken.

Another experiment of this sort has been tried in Asuncion, Paraguay, where the Disciples of Christ recently opened the work. The first step was to send a missionary to live in Asuncion, to take courses in the university and to establish relations on a friendly basis with the people of the community.

These contacts were so well established and confidences so truly gained that when the missionary was ready to establish a school, he found the first people of the community giving blocks of time in helping him find property, run down titles, organize courses, etc. One of the leading lawyers of the city devoted much time to the matter of titles. He would have been entitled to a large fee, but refused to take any at all, because of his interest in the new enterprise. The school and all its foreign teachers are now regarded as a part of the community life in Asuncion, contributing in a large and unique way to the solution of its problems. The government of Paraguay has recently offered to furnish a building in the center of the capital city, to enable this recently established mission school to establish the first kindergarten in Paraguay. It is to be at the same time a training institution for kindergartners. A premature organization of Anglo-Saxon worship, before the Christian workers have made their personal friendships through which the way will lead naturally into organization, would, to my mind, be going both against Latin-American psychology and in the face of apostolic method, and would at the same time greatly delay the real progress of the gospel of Christ in Paraguay.

To bring about a more complete occupation of one of the South American fields one mission board recently agreed to turn over to another the entire evangelical responsibility for a city which is a great student center. The church long established there has not been able to reach the city at large. It has developed a group of sincere believers but they are drawn almost wholly from the uninfluential classes. The new mission is prepared to put a considerable force into the task of reaching that city and its constituencies. Christian strategy would dictate more than the mere multiplication of old methods. This new force should plan a scheme for reaching the intellectual, especially the students who will become the leaders in all that territory. A new missionary might make

natural contacts with students and fit himself better for reaching all classes of people by taking courses in the university and by inviting little groups to his home. From that might develop a community service, including the public preaching of the gospel, which would reach the whole city. In the meantime the relationship of such a missionary to the group of humble Christians in the little church can be entirely cordial and helpful, but his whole program will not be confined to their circle. In other communities where the church has already started but has a narrow circle of influence, and where there is a desire to reach out into other circles, it might be wise to start an entirely different movement in another part of the town, letting the two develop separately. The one always will react favorably on the other, if they are both conducted with the spirit of love and service that animated Christ in His work.

The first missionaries to Peru were forbidden by the authorities to preach, so they put up a photograph gallery and took the people's pictures. For years they had to be contented with preaching as they photographed. The present mission house in Cuzco has all of its windows made of old photographic plates cleansed of the likenesses of the valley's inhabitants. These missionaries not only made photographs but took contracts for public improvements, selling an iron bridge to the government, the placing of which forms one of the choicest stories ever related in South America. Thus, in this way a standing was gained that ultimately allowed the missionaries not only to open a meeting-place, but to exercise a large influence in that capital city. When permission had been gained to preach the gospel, they felt that they were no longer justified in taking pictures or building bridges or doing any other form of general community service. What was the outcome? The city soon concluded that they were merely trying to establish a foreign religion among them. The services were attended by the merest handful of ignorant

people. More recently through their hospital and school work, which they are now building up, the missionaries are finding a new contact with the community life.

It goes without saying that the people of Latin America should be accustomed to listen to preaching. The pulpit has proved its worth through the ages and the Latin-American churches must use it. The question may well be raised, however, whether the most effective preaching must follow unchanging forms. Must a missionary always call his public address a sermon rather than a *conferencia*, as other public addresses are called; must he always take a text and read from the Bible and have congregational singing; must the meeting always be closed with prayer, no matter how many people are kept away by ecclesiastical forms which they regard either as foolish or as compromising? Must the Protestant mark be stamped on all that is published, when to do so often keeps perfectly good people who are honestly interested in the truth, from examining such literature?

"We are ten thousand miles away from these people" said a worker recently when we were discussing the problem of evangelism. That remark will stay with me as long as another of the same sort made by a very conservative missionary on an earlier trip to South America: "We might as well expect to convert these people to Mohammedanism as to the program which we Protestants are now presenting to them." Yet this program can be made both popular and definitely religious. There is no reason for "soft-pedaling" on religion in a school or social center, at a hospital or in a public *conferencia*. South Americans are much more accustomed to talk on religious topics than are North Americans. I have been before many a gathering where there was much hostility to one or both forms of organized Christianity, but never have found opposition to a frank and tactful declaration that I believed in God and was convinced that direct and intimate contact with Him was necessary for a man's or a nation's highest development.

Along these lines one may present his profoundest convictions, and his audiences will continue to grow in interest and in culture.

Latin America hungers for the message of Christ. It does not like the purely Anglo-Saxon method of presenting that message, nor does it care for an emphasis on dogma. Said a very fine Chilean gentleman recently, when explaining his unwillingness to join a Protestant church, "I will do anything for Christ, but nothing for controversy." With only a preaching program evangelical forces may continue in cities like Buenos Aires, Havana, Lima, and Santiago during the whole twentieth century and still the people will be largely ignorant of their presence or indifferent to it.

Latin America needs a religion which will help each individual to solve his problems. A professor in the normal school in Peru said: "The kind of religion we would accept would be one that emphasized beauty, love, and service—one that takes you away from fear. I left the Catholic church because they were always talking about the *infierno*. Maybe it will be as horrible as they say, but I propose to have a little respite from it here. We want something encouraging, not an everlasting threat. Teach us a religion that exalts life and service and we will accept it." It needs likewise a religion that will help to solve the problems of each nation. In discussing with a thoughtful Chilean the question of a probable uprising of the common people of that country against the privileged classes, he said that the only hope he saw of preventing it was the starting by the Protestant churches of a movement of sufficient strength to bring about the necessary reforms through education. Enlightenment and unselfishness are the only hope for the solution of the industrial, economic, moral, social, and political problems that multiply so rapidly in those countries. With the mistakes of Anglo-Saxon countries as a guide, the new industrialism might prevent the exploitation of women and children or the clashing of labor and capital; and to encourage

the development of proper philanthropic organizations, of eleemosynary institutions, of recreative facilities for the young and of an educational system that will put morality first. But Protestantism at present is far from meeting these needs.

It would seem that evangelical missionaries in Latin America have three distinctive services to render. One is the building up of an evangelical church which shall furnish a spiritual home and a working organization through which its membership shall do its part in serving God and humanity. Another is the cleansing of the Roman Catholic church from the error and superstition which clogs its Christian service. The third is the uplift of whole communities to a plane where everyone has a chance to be physically, morally, and spiritually at his best. Which of these services is most important who can say? They are more or less interrelated in their development; but it is the latter service which is awakening the heartiest response today from our southern neighbors.